Animas-La Plata Project

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About this Newsletter

This is the second in a series of six newsletters designed to bring you up-to-date information on the environmental review process associated with the Animas-La Plata Project Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, and implementation of the Colorado Ute Indians Water Rights Settlement Act.

Our first newsletter was published in June 1999 and provided information on the February 1999 scoping meetings, the Settlement Agreement, and the Administration Proposal. This issue focuses on the alternatives evaluation process being performed to comply with the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended.

Future editions of the newsletter will be published at approximately 3 to 4-month intervals. Look for the next issue to coincide with the release of the DSEIS, scheduled for late December 1999.

NEPA Process Underway

On January 4, 1999, the Department of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) announced its intent to prepare a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (Draft SEIS) to the 1996 Final Supplement to the Final Environmental Statement (FSFES) for the Animas-La Plata Project (ALP). During the past several months, the ALP Project Team has been busy implementing the initial stages of the NEPA process outlined in Reclamation's Plan of Approach, which describes the approach and process for preparing the SEIS (the Plan of Approach can be viewed at Reclamation's ALP website; see the sidebar on page 3 of this newsletter.)

NEPA requires a thorough and objective review of a reasonable range of alternatives. The Federal Register Notice of Intention (NOI) issued by Reclamation in January 1999 described a broad range of alternatives to be evaluated in the Draft SEIS. Initially, eight alternatives were identified—a proposed action (i.e., the Administration Proposal), a no-action alternative, and four structural and two non-structural alternatives. The structural alternatives focused on the construction of Ridges Basin Reservoir which would divert water from the Animas River. The nonstructural alternatives identified ways of providing the Tribes with stored water from

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Alternatives Evaluation Process

In the January 1999 Federal Register NOI, the Bureau of Reclamation indicated that each of the alternatives would undergo an analysis beginning with a threshold assessment of the alternative's capability to meet the project's purpose and need. Because of the extensive history of the Animas-La Plata Project and the wealth of data and analyses that have been performed in the past, much of the environmental documentation needed to perform this assessment already existed. To the extent that some of the new alternatives had not been previously fully evaluated, some additional field reconnaissance-level data gathering was required to ensure that each practicable alternative could be given a fair and objective evaluation.

Teams of resource specialists, economists, and engineers looked at the practicality and the potential environmental impacts of the ten alternatives in terms of three distinct components: 1) the structural components, which include the reservoirs, pumping plants, and conveyance systems; 2) the non-structural components, such as the Tribal Water Use Fund to acquire land and water rights in the project area, and changes in practices to make additional volumes of water available from existing federal facilities; and 3) a representative range of non-binding uses that the Tribes could make of water provided.

The team evaluated a number of structural approaches, including construction of several different on-stream and off-stream reservoirs, from Howardsville at the headwaters of the Animas River to an ancillary facility at Aztec as part of Alternative #8. The team also evaluated the potential for enlarging Lemon Dam on the Florida River in order to increase reservoir storage and available water for the Tribes. In addition, water conservation on the Pine River was evaluated to determine if additional water could be realized by converting open, unlined canals to pressurrized pipelines and sprinkler irrigation. The potential for reallocating

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